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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [TS](#)  
SUBJECT: SENIOR GOT OFFICIALS' COMMENTS TARGET USG AND EU

REF: A. TUNIS 501  
[1](#)B. 03/01/2006 ERELI STATEMENT  
[1](#)C. TUNIS 425  
[1](#)D. TUNIS 387

Classified By: AMBASSADOR WILLIAM HUDSON FOR REASONS 1.4 (b) AND (d)

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: Recent speeches by senior GOT officials have directly addressed domestic reform initiatives of (while not mentioning by name) USG, as well as other foreign entities and domestic activists. Presidential Spokesman and Advisor Abdelaziz Ben Dhia, Minister of Social Affairs Ali Chaouch, Minister of Justice and Human Rights Bechir Tekkari and ruling Democratic Constitutional Rally (RCD) party Secretary General Hedi M'henni indirectly rebutted official USG policy positions on Tunisia in their comments. Ben Dhia denied the presence of political prisoners and the absence of freedom of speech in Tunisia, while adding that activists "who rely on foreigners for support...have no loyalty." Chaouch more specifically targeted the USG when he refuted the suggestion that Tunisia's economic reforms have outpaced political reforms. The strong rhetoric, particularly on the eve of what is likely to be a significant presidential speech (on the March 20th fiftieth anniversary of Tunisian independence), suggests that the GOT, and more specifically, the RCD, is likely to remain recalcitrant to USG and other demands for increased political reform. END SUMMARY.

[1](#)2. (C) Ben Dhia, Chaouch and M'henni are some of the most senior and influential Tunisian political personalities and members of the RCD political bureau. Ben Dhia has been the Special Advisor to President Ben Ali since 1999 and prior to that was the Secretary General of the RCD from 1996-99. Chaouch was named Minister of Social Affairs in August 2005 and before that was also Secretary General of the RCD from 2000-05. M'henni was previously a minister in four different ministries, including Defense and Interior, before being named RCD Secretary General in August 2005. While they do not mention any country by name, their comments are the strongest and most directed criticism of US and EU policies toward Tunisia in recent memory.

[1](#)3. (C) On March 10, Presidential Spokesman, Special Advisor and RCD Political Bureau member Abdelaziz Ben Dhia made a speech to RCD and other government organizations in a suburb of Tunis. His comments specifically targeted USG policies and statements on Tunisia on the following topics:

-- Political Prisoners: Ben Dhia said there are no political prisoners in Tunisia, an oft-repeated GOT position. However, Ben Dhia expanded, saying "what they meant were those whose crimes were against individuals are known to all of us...To pretend that there are political prisoners in Tunisia is an

unfounded excuse." This comment appears to be directed, at least in part, at the Department's March 1 statement (Ref B) welcoming the late February release of nearly 1600 Tunisian prisoners (Ref C), as well as those NGO groups that characterize some of these individuals as political prisoners.

-- Freedom of Speech: Ben Dhia asked, "How can they accuse us of violating the freedom of press and expression? In Tunisia, there are 253 newspapers and publications." (NOTE: This is a common argument used consistently by the Mission's Tunisian interlocutors. END NOTE.) Although the "they" Ben Dhia refers to is unclear, the USG and our European allies regularly call for increased freedom of speech in Tunisia and the establishment of more independent media.

-- Independent Activists: Ben Dhia criticized those who reach out to foreigners for support, saying such Tunisians "were behind the colonization of our country in the past." He added, "I am surprised by those who accept money from abroad." This common GOT position against foreign funding for local organizations and activists was recently enforced by a diplomatic note sent to all embassies reminding them to obey the laws related to providing support to local entities.

Ben Dhia went on to criticize the recent alliance between leftists and Islamists (Ref D), saying it was "illogical and unacceptable." He also said the GOT considers the Tunisian Human Rights League (LTDH, Ref A) a "national achievement" and that its current crisis is "internal."

¶4. (C) At a March 11 RCD meeting in Bizerte, Minister of Social Affairs, Solidarity and Tunisians Abroad Ali Chaouch added his voice to Ben Dhia's, commenting these issues as well as another main USG policy statement:

-- Speed of Political Reform: Chaouch rejected "foreign evaluations that say economic reforms are more advanced than political reforms." This responds to an oft-repeated USG position that "Tunisia should match its considerable economic and social progress with comparable progress on political reform."

Chaouch also lauded Ben Ali's achievements on freedom of speech, human rights and the absence of political prisoners, echoing some of Ben Dhia's stronger statements.

¶5. (C) On March 14, Minister of Justice and Human Rights Tekkari reinforced these comments in a similar speech given to RCD members in the southern city of Gabes. The next day, RCD Secretary General M'henni gave another speech with similar points to quasi-governmental organizations and other RCD members.

¶6. (C) COMMENT: The comments of these officials seem to further reinforce GOT efforts to tighten the party lines, rather than make way for increased political reform. While comments such as Chaouch's on the speed of political reform seem to target the USG, the broader and more heated criticism of domestic entities that reach out to foreign governments appears directed at the EU. Tunisia is currently discussing the reform elements of the EU "Good Neighbor" policy, which more directly seeks increased civil society development. Foreign Minister Abdallah told visiting A/S Welch on March 15 that these talks require "a lot of our attention," which may explain the new GOT and RCD focus on refuting efforts to engage or encourage civil society.

¶7. (C) COMMENT, CONT.: Not surprisingly, French language press coverage of these events was limited and not so directly critical of the US or EU as Arabic language coverage. For example, the RCD French daily Le Renouveau said Chaouch stressed the inclusive nature of President Ben Ali's reform efforts in Tunisia, without any distinction of economic and political reforms. The press coverage is more interesting given the fact that the GOT's official response to the March 1st USG statement on the prisoner release received no coverage in Tunisia. In fact, one local reporter who had seen the GOT statement was specifically told not to cover it for the local press. END COMMENT.

